

The Building Blocks of Faith: Jesus  
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This morning we continue our sermon series on the “Building Blocks of Faith.” We’re going to take a look at Jesus and see if we can’t come to some conclusions about what we do and don’t believe about him.

Our task has been made much more complex by the recent media focus on Jesus. You wouldn’t think that a guy who lived 2000 years ago would be so popular, but lately he’s gotten more exposure than Janet Jackson. First, “The DaVinci Code” sparked a flurry of debates over the person of Jesus. And then, when you thought Jesus couldn’t get any more controversial, Mel Gibson released his little independent film called “The Passion of the Christ,” For awhile there you couldn’t turn on the TV without seeing some news special or historical program exploring the life and death of Jesus Christ, which meant there was a lot of information and mis-information to sort through to get to the truth.

It’s kinda like that old game show, “To Tell the Truth.” Do you remember that? There would be three people, all claiming to be Bill Smith. The celebrity panel would ask them questions to try to figure out who was lying, and at the end the announcer would say, “Would the real Bill Smith please stand up!” These last few years there’s been a lot of questions asked to try and get the real Jesus to stand up.

Actually, the efforts to discover the “real” Jesus have been going on a lot longer than that. For decades, academic scholars have been fascinated with unearthing what they called the “historical Jesus” – that is, finding out as much information as they could about Jesus’ time here on earth. There was one group called the Jesus Seminar that actually color-coded Jesus’ sayings in the Bible according to the probability that he actually said them: green meant he definitely did, yellow meant “maybe”, and red was “no way.”

I think it would be interesting to know more about Jesus’ time here on earth, but I’m skeptical about its value. First of all, I don’t know how much we can truly know. It was, after all, 2000 years ago. But more importantly, I don’t know how much it matters. I have all I need to know about Jesus’ life here on earth; in fact, I have four accounts of his life, in Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. The gospels weren’t written as historical accounts or biographical sketches, but they don’t have to be to be Good News. They were written to witness to the work of God through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. They were written not to give us archeological or historical knowledge, but to give us faith knowledge.

I don’t deny the historical existence of Jesus; I absolutely believed he lived and walked the earth. But what we can know about Jesus through historical investigation is very limited, and anything that goes beyond what the Bible tells us is some degree of speculation, and must be treated as such, even if it’s written in a book or put up on a movie screen. It is the character of Jesus, and not his biography, that matters to our faith.

So if we limit our understanding of Jesus to what’s in the four gospels, what do we know about who Jesus was, the essence of his being? Actually, it’s quite confusing. For example, at times he forgives sins, which was believed to be a decision only God could make. He performs miraculous healings and commands demons to flee. Was Jesus divine? At other times we see Jesus displaying a full range of human emotions and

feelings: anger, grief, compassion. He worked as a carpenter, he wore clothes and ate meals. Was Jesus human? Will the real Jesus please stand up?

The debate about the humanity and divinity of Jesus has been going on for as long as there's been church committees. Some groups argued that Jesus was fully human, a great prophet and teacher, but no divine. Other groups claimed that Jesus was fully divine, that he never blinked his eyes or left footprints, only appearing to be human for the sake of his followers.

Who's right? I believe they both are, that Jesus was both fully human and fully divine. It's reflected in his name: Jesus (his given earthly name) and Christ (which means "messiah" or "anointed one"). To say we believe in Jesus Christ is to proclaim him fully human and fully divine, both of which are essential to me for my belief.

Jesus had to be fully human. He had to be one of us. For Jesus to be fully human means that Jesus knows all the complexities and contradictions of what it means to live. He knows what it's like to be hungry, to feel sad, to be angry, to have dreams, to lose loved ones, to feel pain, and to die. A human Jesus understands what I go through and gives me hope for a better life beyond this one, something to believe in beyond the cruel randomness of life on earth.

A fully human Jesus also provides for us an example of a life lived for God. We are to strive to live as Jesus of Nazareth lived. We may not be able to heal someone, but we can sit with them, talk with them, care for their wounds. We may not be able to feed 5000 people with a couple loaves of bread and a few pieces of fish, but we can help feed 150 people at St. Bart's Soup Kitchen. As a human being, Jesus showed us a life of service and obedience, and calls us to live the same in response to God's love for us.

Jesus' divinity is just as important. Jesus was God, the Word made flesh, God incarnate on earth. Because Jesus was divine, we know that God, our Creator, has entered into solidarity with us and knows what we go through. Our hope comes from knowing that God, through Christ, has experienced what we've experienced. We know that the promises Jesus made will be good for all time. The forgiveness Jesus offered wasn't a human pardon; it was God's forgiveness. Jesus is the only person in history who has brought together these two qualities of humanity and divinity. In Jesus Christ the perfect love of God and the perfect human response to that love are united.

But Jesus' divinity has even further-reaching consequences. The fact that Jesus was fully divine means that the work that he started in his earthly ministry didn't end on the cross. The passage from Luke tells us what that work is: To preach the good news to the poor, to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed and proclaim the year of the Lord's favor. In Matthew Jesus says it a different way: His work was to show that the kingdom of God was coming.

Jesus came to earth to show us what the kingdom of God looks like. That's why he has so many parables that start off, "The Kingdom of God is like a mustard seed," "the Kingdom of God is like a treasure hidden in a field." Jesus came to show us what the Kingdom of God was like, to proclaim the coming of God's kingdom here on earth.

A lot of people thought that meant that end was near, that Judgment Day was coming, that God was about to intervene in history. But there's another interpretation. I believe that in his time on earth, Jesus began the coming of God's kingdom here on earth. Jesus started the process. He blessed the poor, he healed the sick, he ate with sinners, he spent time with the outsiders. Jesus was not simply a human being; he is the example and

promise of what humanity would look like if God's kingdom were here on earth. He started the work of the kingdom of God.

And now Jesus, the living Christ, calls us to continue his work, to be co-laborers with him in ushering in God's kingdom here on earth. To say you believe in Jesus Christ means you believe in the earthly work of Jesus 2000 years ago, that you believe in the work of the living Christ today, and that you are willing to participate in that work. He didn't tell his disciples to sit back and wait until God brought forth his kingdom. He told them to get to work! "Go, make disciples of all nations, baptize them, teach them to do what I have taught you to do, to bring about God's kingdom here on earth."

What do we pray each week? God's kingdom come, God's will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Who is called to do God's will, to make God's kingdom come here on earth? The followers of Jesus Christ. You and me.

When you join a Disciples of Christ church, you only have to answer one simple question: Do you believe that Jesus is the Christ, the son of the living God, and do you accept him as your Lord and Savior? We do not profess belief in an archeological relic to be unearthed and put on display. We believe in Jesus, who walked the earth and showed us a glimpse of God's kingdom. We believe in Christ, who lives today and works through us to bring about that kingdom. And we believe in God, who lived in and worked through Jesus Christ to show us how much we are loved, and how much we are to love others.